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Changing Skyline: Drexel's new business school building takes its surroundings into account

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The smart, contemporary new Gerri C. LeBow Hall at Drexel is a joint design of Robert A.M. Stern Architects and Philadelphia's Voith & Mactavish Architects.

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Like the prow of a ship, the main facade of Drexel University's new business school at 32d and Market Streets steers toward Center City, straining to narrow the two-block gap between the Schuylkill and its fast-growing campus. In a bit of overt symbolism, the university even relocated a statue of founder Anthony Drexel to the entrance plaza, so he now stands firmly at the helm of this eastward venture.

Under its current president, John A. Fry, Drexel has made no secret of its desire to fill that bleak, underutilized space with the sleek towers of a new technology-dominated neighborhood. Consider the new Gerri C. LeBow Hall, named for the late wife of the business school's main benefactor, the advance guard in that effort.

Whenever a private institution expresses such grand territorial ambitions, city residents have reason to be wary. This is especially true in West Philadelphia, where there is a history of blunt urban renewal by its two academic powerhouses. But if LeBow's design is any indication, Drexel recognizes its obligation to create vibrant spaces that benefit the whole city.

The 12-story, glass-and-limestone tower does a brilliant job of helping to turn the badly treated Market Street intersection back into a real place again. As pure design, the \$92 million LeBow Hall is also the most satisfying of Drexel's recent construction. Instead of reflexively piling on marble for future masters of the universe, as many business schools do, LeBow conjures real architecture out of space and light.

The surprise is that the designers of this smart, contemporary building are none other than Robert A.M. Stern Architects and Philadelphia's Voith & Mactavish Architects. These firms typically work in a neo-traditionalist style (e.g. Stern's 10 Rittenhouse) that can be cloying and, in the case of Stern, occasionally bombastic (the Harvard Law School's Wasserstein Hall).

But Stern's firm actually does a lot of code-switching between modern and traditional designs, and is best known in Philadelphia for its all-glass Comcast tower. The two firms' interest in historical buildings has given them a strong urbanist sensibility, which they use to good advantage at LeBow.

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Drexel, like its neighbor the University of Pennsylvania, has been increasingly focused on installing lively buildings to reinvigorate the city streets damaged during the heyday of campus-building, when the two schools were both intent on walling themselves off from the rest of Philadelphia. Take Drexel's new Chestnut Square dorm, also by Stem's firm: Grafted onto the front of the Mandell Theater, it is now lined with retail, much like a good apartment house.

Since LeBow does not include retail, other than the obligatory Starbucks, the designers had to find other means to connect to the surroundings. Their strategy was to honor the site's urban past.

You might never suspect it today, but 32d and Market was once a major crossroads, the spot where Lancaster and Woodland Avenues converged. Decades ago, the two colonial-era roads were wiped off the map, the road straightened, and the intersection reduced to a generic highway node, dominated by a Firestone dealer and a drive-through bank. The only evidence of its past glory is Frank Furness' great Centennial National Bank, whose angled facade was meant to align with Woodland Avenue.

Inspired by Furness' design, LeBow's architects shaped its base to echo all three streets - Woodland, Lancaster and Market. The gesture goes a long way to restoring the memory of the intersection's lost urban geometry.

You can see it most strongly on the 32d Street corner, where LeBow's shaved facade acts a counterpoint to Furness' Centennial Bank. By setting up the two contrasting angles - one in red brick, the other in gray glass - the architects establish the beginnings of a strong urban ensemble. The building that previously occupied the site, one of Drexel's '60s-era orange-brick towers, was so generic, it could have existed anywhere.

By playing the angles, the architects also have produced a very dynamic building that seems to swirl around the site. While the base is bounded by the lines of the vanished streets, the limestone tower sits almost perpendicular to Market Street. Its canted window dividers further emphasize the rippling sense of movement. Not surprisingly, the tower, which has the best views of Center City, houses faculty offices.

The architects distinguish the classroom portion in the base by using glass bays. Each facade has a slightly different rhythm, in response to the conditions on the ground. The south side of the building follows Woodland Walk, creating a strong edge for the renovated Drexel Quadrangle. Right now, the space is fairly bland, but it provides a frame for admiring Drexel's other new buildings, Chestnut Square and the Papadakis Integrated Sciences Building, which both reflect Drexel's shift to a white color scheme.

What makes LeBow's design especially impressive is that the exterior sensibility is carried over into the interior to form a triangular atrium. Painted almost entirely in white, the space is modulated by a deft arrangement of arcades and bays. Light tumbles in from clerestory windows, and bounces gently off fins and columns. The intricate geometry calls to mind one of the small baroque churches of the Roman architect Borromini - sans the sculpture, of course.

Like classical architecture, the atrium is a study in perspective. The triangle terminates on the east in a sharp point. At the west end, the architects hung a ceremonial staircase. While it looks impressive against a persimmon background, close up you see it is supported by metal poles. That's like a magician letting you see how the trick is done.

That's a small quibble. Otherwise, LeBow is packed with comfortable nooks and lounges for studying. Indeed, like so many academic buildings today, it seems to be all lounges.

Looking out its generous windows toward Market Street, you can't help but wonder what will happen next at this intersection. Drexel has acquired the other two corners - paying a whopping \$9 million for the 30,000-square-foot Firestone site, which it hopes to use for a new student center. In a few years' time, 32d and Market will likely be the heart of the Drexel campus. By then, its awful days as a highway strip should be just a memory.

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